

GI's efforts send ripples of care to Iraqi girl

'Angel' pleads for help after 4-year-old is caught in crossfire

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
The Kansas City Star

It was late April at Tallil Air Base in Iraq, and a 4-year-old girl named Diyar Fiaz was staring at the white-coated strangers gathered around her hospital bed.

They were telling her grandparents that she would probably never walk again, a virtual death sentence for a child in Iraq, where special services and medical care are scarce.

Authorities believe Diyar's parents died in the same barrage of crossfire at a Nasiriyah checkpoint that peppered Diyar and her siblings with bullets. Her brother and sister were not critically injured. Di-

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who had fallen in love with the little girl. Dowell, the information manager for the 22nd Communications Squadron out of McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, is herself a mother of three. She hadn't seen them since her deployment almost a year earlier.

As a volunteer at the base's trauma clinic, Dowell, 41, met many Iraqis. Volunteering was a chance to show them kindness. But it hadn't taken long for her to bond with the little girl with black wavy hair who was quick to giggle, doling out soft kisses as thank yous.

As the doctors spoke to Diyar's grandparents, Dowell began crying, too. It seemed too much to bear for them as she watched their weathered faces take in so much sadness. When Diyar's grandmother grabbed Dowell's arm, begging her in Arabic to help, Dowell understood even before the interpreter explained what she was saying.

Please, please help her. Don't let her die. Isn't there something you can do?

Dowell looked at the child. Sweet. Innocent. Collateral damage in the war. She couldn't bear to think of the hardships and probably shortened life that were facing Diyar. She prayed there was something she could do. And she promised Diyar's grandmother she would try to find people who could help.

Back at the base where she worked, Dowell flooded cyberspace with requests for Diyar.

One of her e-mails reached Eaman AlGorbory, a doctor in Baghdad. Although Dowell wouldn't know it until months later, her caring would create ripples of kindness, changing one child's fate.

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"Dr. Eaman,

Here is as much info as I could get on the little girl named Diyar. ...I have been praying and praying that there is still *something* that could be done for her. ...I just want to help an Iraqi girl who won over my heart."



Submitted

"Her miracle was the American named Roxanne. ...She was...sent to help this child," said Eaman AlGorbory of Diyar Fiaz (above).

Not a day passes without AlGorbory hearing medical cases like Diyar's. Her job is to link Iraqi children with the specialists they need, whether that help is in Iraq or beyond its borders.

But this e-mail was different. It was sent by an American service member who was asking on behalf of an Iraqi child.

AlGorbory is the medical director for the Medical Evacuation and Health Rehabilitation Program in Iraq, which is under the umbrella of the United Nations. So far, more than 930 children have received specialized treatment, medical care not available in the still dilapidated Iraqi health-care system.

"Because of all our infrastructure problems, often the water is not working, or the electricity — our hospitals have many problems still," she said in a telephone interview from Baghdad. "It's getting a little bit better, but it needs lots of hard, hard work to get it better. ...This is the real life story from the street, because I am a field worker."

Problems are common, AlGorbory said: infections, lack of correct medicines, even medical mistakes.

"This child was having no chance to improve," she said after rereading the e-mails from Dowell. "Her miracle was the American named Roxanne. Because of her big heart and her clear vision on where to find help, she was the messenger sent to help this child."

After examining Diyar's X-rays and medical files, AlGorbory e-mailed the best neurosurgeon she knew of in Iraq: an American doctor named Jeff Poffenbarger.

Poffenbarger is a neurosurgeon and lieutenant colonel with the Army's 31st Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad. Every day, he deals with the trauma cases that a war creates, including operating on Iraqi children caught in crossfire between insurgents and coalition forces.

Helping children, he said by satellite phone from Baghdad, "makes seeing the death and destruction here a little better. ... Helping one sick child is helping a neighborhood, because everyone hears about it."

At 42, he's been in the Army 20 years. Home in the United States is San Antonio, and Poffenbarger's married, with four children. A former Green Beret and Ranger, he said he had shot his share of bullets.

"But I've got six or nine or 12 months where I can really make a difference here," he said.

Poffenbarger read the e-mail on Diyar from AlGorbory, reviewed the girl's medical records and wrote back. He would try to operate on her, but she needed to come to him in Baghdad. Poffenbarger's first priority is coalition soldiers wounded in action.

"The bottom line is that when people come to us with sick children, there are no politics involved."

Jeff Poffenbarger

yar was.

South Korean doctors worked through the night, removing bullets from her chest and back, trying to save her life.

But there was nothing they could do about the last bullet.

It had lodged in her spine, nicking the spinal cord. Fluid was oozing out. Knowing the surgery was

too intricate for their skills, the South Korean doctors closed her up.

Now, after two weeks of hospital care, she was being sent home.

Diyar's tiny body seemed smaller as she cuddled the stuffed toy camel that an American friend had given her. Her brown eyes watched her grandparents talking with the doctors through an interpreter. Her grandmother, dressed in the black *abaya* robes that Shia Muslim women wear, began crying and shaking her head. Her grandfather was crying, too.

Watching this unfold was Air Force Tech. Sgt. Roxanne Dowell.

GIRL: Spinal surgery to remove bullet gives child a chance for a normal life

At first, Diyar's family heard the news with joy. Then reality settled in. How could they travel more than 200 miles? They would need another miracle finding a car with gasoline, as well as a driver who could take them — scarce commodities for people who earn the equivalent of \$3.50 a day, at most.

Again, Dowell stepped in, hiring a local Iraqi man to drive, hoping he was as honest as he said. Although she wanted to drive the family herself, that was not possible. After a year of serving in Iraq, she finally had her orders to return home — the same day Diyar and her family would leave for Baghdad.

"Roxanne found a driver, paid for its gasoline, and Diyar and her grandmother made it here," said AlGorbory, adding that it was no small feat traveling on roads littered with the attempts of others who tried to skirt homemade bombs, insurgents and coalition troops trying to quell violence. "Roxanne didn't know if Diyar made it until I e-mailed her....

"This little girl has many angels helping her."

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Poffenbarger remembers the day he met Diyar. She laughed at his poor attempt to speak Arabic, and her grandmother held up a photo of the smiling Dowell and then kissed it.

The American doctor has seen so many Iraqi civilians, some too traumatized to undergo surgery.

Not so with Diyar.

"Diyar, she's a little kid who's been through so much.... She agreed to do whatever it takes," Poffenbarger said.

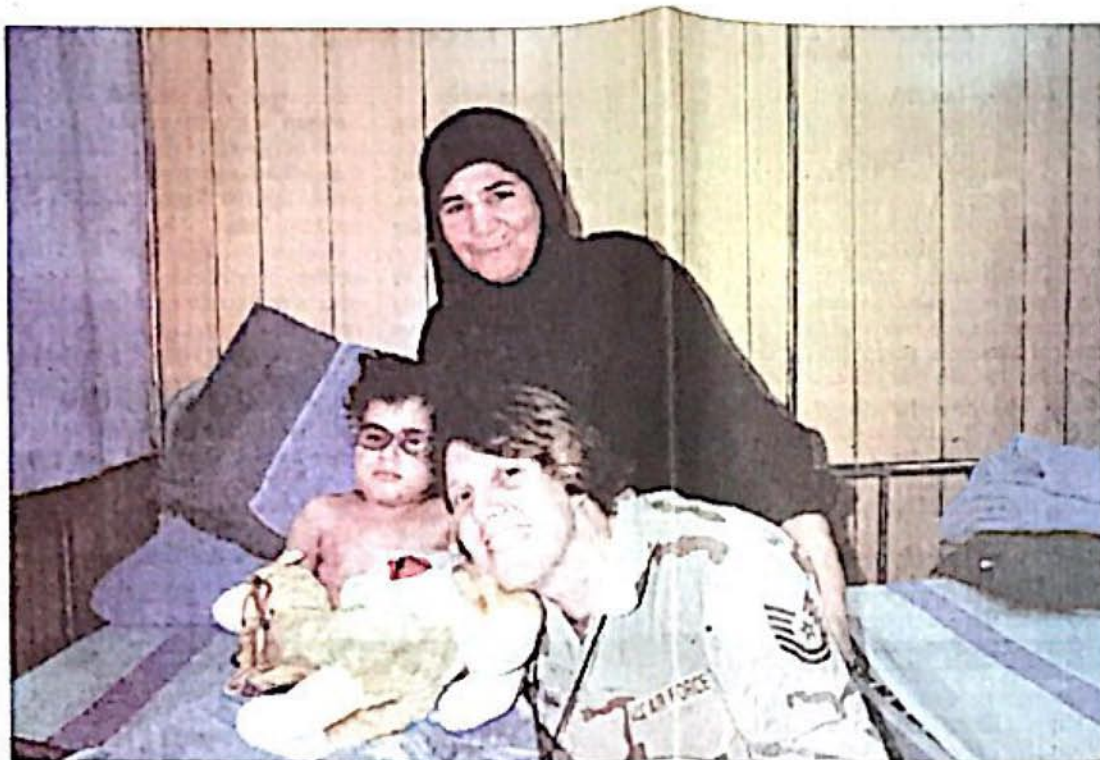
He has seen children recoil at meeting an American, he said.

"Often we're the first Americans they've ever seen without full body armor or riding in a Humvee with a gun pointed at them," he said.

But Diyar already had met one American who was her friend. Poffenbarger explained what was needed, and he ran a series of medical tests including CAT scans and X-rays. He prescribed medicine that could assist in healing the injury, but it was causing a painful burning in the extremities.

Diyar grimaced but forged on. After a few days, she could move her feet slightly. But Poffenbarger wanted her to be able to walk. Her life depended on it.

"The ability to work, to marry and to bear children is very important here," he said. "There's no special mechanics in place to help the disabled. Basically, she would just pass away. Many already do."



Submitted

At Tallil Air Force Base in Iraq, Diyar Fiaz, 4, was visited by her grandmother and Air Force Tech. Sgt. Roxanne Dowell, of Wichita. Dowell helped the little girl find the medical care she needed to walk again.

Behind the scenes, Poffenbarger also had to work the politics of securing the proper approvals from several dozen Iraqi and American agencies. "The system is designed to weed out the faint of heart," he said.

But Diyar had plenty of courage, and the love of new friends. The staff at the 31st Combat Support Hospital knew Diyar, Poffenbarger said.

"I had to keep the nurses out of her room because everyone fell in love with her," he said.

On July 6, Poffenbarger and a team of Iraqi and American neurosurgeons operated on Diyar. Every surgery that the American neurosurgeons perform in Baghdad is an opportunity to teach their Iraqi counterparts new skills. It took hours of delicate movements to pick out the damage that the bullet had caused inside the girl's spine. The debris and scar tissue were hardened obstacles even for hands used to battling wounds of war.

Finally the area was clean, the bullet's remnants removed. Although the operation seemed successful, only time would prove if it was. The team waited.

But not for long.

Thirty-six hours later, Diyar surprised everyone by standing. And since then she's started taking baby steps.

"She won't walk like you or I," Poffenbarger said. And Diyar still has a long recovery in front of her.

"The big issue is learning to walk again," he said. "She's a 4-year-old with 9-month-old skills. And that's hard for her."

Diyar can pull herself around her house and do the exercises the physical therapists showed her. Poffenbarger also found Diyar a present. He called his buddies in Special Operations, and somehow a pediatric wheelchair appeared just before Diyar was scheduled to go home to Nasiriyah. He hopes that when she's 5 or 6 she won't need the wheelchair at all, except for long periods of walking.

Poffenbarger and Dowell have kept in touch. Dowell sent Diyar's family a small box of gifts and told Poffenbarger in an e-mail. "Please know I'm always thrilled to hear anything about her situation, good or bad."

Dowell, now home in Wichita, is retiring from the military in eight weeks after 20 years of service. She declined to be interviewed, saying she didn't believe she had done anything extraordinary. Others disagree.

She was Diyar's angel, both Poffenbarger and AlGorbory said.

About this report

The Star reconstructed Diyar's story through interviews with Iraqi physician Eaman AlGorbory and American neurosurgeon Jeff Poffenbarger, and reviews of e-mails between them and Air Force Tech. Sgt. Roxanne Dowell of Wichita.

"You are the one who really all of us should thank," AlGorbory wrote to Dowell late last month.

Diyar is due back for more physical therapy this week, Poffenbarger said. And, he says, staffers at the hospital have been asking him for days: "When is she returning?"

"The bottom line is that when people come to us with sick children, there are no politics involved," he said. "We want to help them feel better."

And Poffenbarger added one final note to Diyar's story: The bullet the surgery team extracted so delicately, the one that had caused so much harm, "was a foreign-made bullet," he said.

"We were so happy it wasn't one of ours."

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